

Fragment of the Month: January 2015

The language of women: L-G Arabic 2.129

By Esther-Miriam Wagner

Men and women are said to have different ways of communicating. This presents itself not only anecdotally in oral conversation but the writing of male and female authors empirically shows gender-specific characteristics. Sociolinguistic investigations, for example, have demonstrated that the language used by women in letters is distinct from that of contemporary men (see for example Bergs 2005, 180-181). Not only the gender of the writer is decisive; the gender of the addressee is of equal importance (Bergs 2005, 181-183).

A comprehensive study of the linguistic peculiarities of female writers of documents in the Genizah is still a desideratum. Investigations into the subject are complicated by the fact that many of the letters with female senders are obviously written by male scribes, whereas female penmanship can be assured in only a few cases. Yet, this is not necessarily a hindrance as the writing behaviour of an author also changes when he or she is dictated a letter by someone of a different gender and age group (Bergs 2015, 124). To include both letters written or dictated by women into one corpus is thus methodologically not particularly troublesome. Another category of correspondence to be examined should include letters written to female addressees, although very often letters written to women are sent by other women, and therefore a large number of letters will belong to both categories.

One of the documents in the newly acquired Lewis-Gibson Collection, L-G Arabic 2.129, is a letter penned by a certain Ibrahim (who introduces himself on the verso), but which was dictated by a female family member. From the layout and handwriting we can assume that it was written in the 12th or 13th century. The use of feminine verbal forms and the address show that the letter is sent to another woman, Ibrahim's mother, who may be in Qūṣ (Upper Egypt) because it is mentioned as the place where she is asked to sell a belt (l. 21). The letter is

interesting also for its social content: a slave woman with the name Ṣayd is pregnant and wants to marry another slave, which apparently causes great distress for her owners. Her children are also mentioned, as are her intentions to sue the addressee of the letter for child support. Goitein (1978, 275) mentions the letter in the context of re-marriage, but appears to have misinterpreted some of the key sentences of the letter.

The language of the letter is fairly emotional, for example the writer repeats numerous times the rhetorical expletives 'don't ask what happened to us', 'don't ask what's in my heart', etc, and recounts various misfortunes that have befallen the family. Linguistically, it shows a number of very colloquial forms that are unusual for a letter of the time. Without a comprehensive analysis of women's letters, it is difficult to prove that many of the exceptional features of the letter are due to the dictation by a woman. Only an empirical study of the language in correspondence dictated or written by women as compared with contemporary correspondence written or dictated by men could confirm these suspicions. Yet I would like to raise the possibility that the letters written by or dictated for women are linguistically closer to the spoken language and more removed from standard linguistic conventions. Using substandard language often has to do with language immediacy - writers use a less formal register to be able to communicate in a less formal setting and to connect more intimately with their readers. Since women in the Genizah rarely corresponded on an official level but mostly within families, it would be expected that women's writing or dictation is composed in more colloquial Judaeo-Arabic. It may seem less necessary or appropriate for the male family member taking the dictation to render the colloquial speech he would be hearing into formal Arabic, as he may feel obliged to when writing for a man. Rather, he would write what he was hearing, or how he thought the woman might write a letter. Of course, men would use colloquial forms in their own writings too, often related, although not exclusively, to their level of literacy. Yet, those able to master various registers of polite Classical Judaeo-Arabic when writing for women perhaps did not experience the pressure of having to adhere to prescriptive standards in the same way as when they wrote for men. It is thus not so much the literacy of women that shapes the language in dictated letters but rather what the male family member acting as a scribe thought of female literacy.

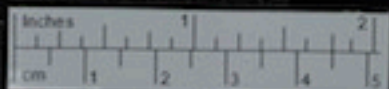
The unusual linguistic features in the letter are orthographical, morphological and syntactical in nature. After reporting that her daughter and a certain Abū l-Ḥasan fell from the roof into the courtyard, she adds that God was merciful and: ש'לם יציבהם 'they were not injured' (ll. 8-9). The ש' is probably a misspelling of ṣay but may also point at the negation particle -š, which would be a chronologically extremely early example, as it can normally only be found in Late Judaeo-Arabic texts.

First singular n-imperfects (for a discussion of the form see Wagner 2010, 23-24) occur for example in קאלת אנא נכון ממלוכה 'she said: I am a slave' (l. 16) and in אנא אברהים נקבל ידיין אלשיך אבו אלחסן 'I, Ibrahim, kiss the hands of the elder Abū I-Ḥasan' (ll. v5-6), which additionally shows the tanwīn in the word ידיין in a genitive construction, as does תבוסי עינין אם אסמעיל אחתי 'kiss the eyes of Umm Ismail, my sister' (l. 25) in עינין. This phenomenon occasionally occurs in other letters (see Wagner 2010, 95), but also appears to be more common in the later Genizah period.

The possessive particle *bita*‘, which is a typical Late Judaeo-Arabic feature, can be found in ואללה אללה סאעה וקופך עלי האדה אלאחרף תנפדי אלחלק בתאעי מע בנת כאלך סת 'quickly, the moment you read these lines, send my ring with your cousin Sitt Nisrīn' (ll. 18-20).

In one example, the article is written in assimilated form in אשיך אבו אלחסן 'the elder Abū I-Ḥasan' (l. v13), although the rest of the letter shows the article in al-šayḵ in morphophonematic spelling (for examples ll. v6 and v14). This sort of variation is very common in letters, and may be a random feature, yet sometimes factors can be determined that trigger alternative spellings. I wonder whether in this instance it may be a deliberate decision: Abū I-Ḥasan residing with the senders of the letter (as opposed to the grown-up of the same name occurring in greetings as being in the household of the addressees) is mentioned as having fallen from the roof and appears to be a child, as evident from the request to buy a nice present for him from the proceeds of the sale of a belt (ll. 22-23). By using the colloquial form of 'the elder' it may give an ironical touch to the title and convey the meaning of 'little elder'.

To sum up, the number of unusual linguistic forms in this letter is conspicuous for the time period, and we may consider the possibility that this is directly related to the fact that the letter was to a large part dictated by a woman. I hope to be able to work on the analysis of a wider corpus in the near future, ideally utilising forthcoming works about women's correspondence by Renee Melammed and Joel Kramer, and to gather comprehensive data on this topic.



והקול להאמרו כי תבסל מכל
אורך יכתב בכה"י ועלמנה
אכצמך וחקלך צמנה מעמך
ואמנה ותנודתך למנה מאמך
ואכצמך ומנה ומנה מאמך
נקבל (ודיון) משך אצלם ונחלה
ואמנה מאמך למנה מאמך
כאן צמנה ולמה צמנה למנה
ואמנה מאמך צמנה מאמך
מנה צמנה ולמה צמנה
ואמנה מאמך ונחלה וכל
ואמנה מאמך ונחלה
על משך אצלם ומנה
על משך אצלם ונחלה
ואמנה מאמך ונחלה
מנה צמנה ולמה צמנה
ענך

Handwritten text in a different script, possibly Arabic or Persian, located at the bottom of the page. The text is partially obscured by a large, dark, irregular stain or tear in the parchment.

I would like to thank Professor Mordechai Akiva Friedman for giving me valuable suggestions for this article.

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